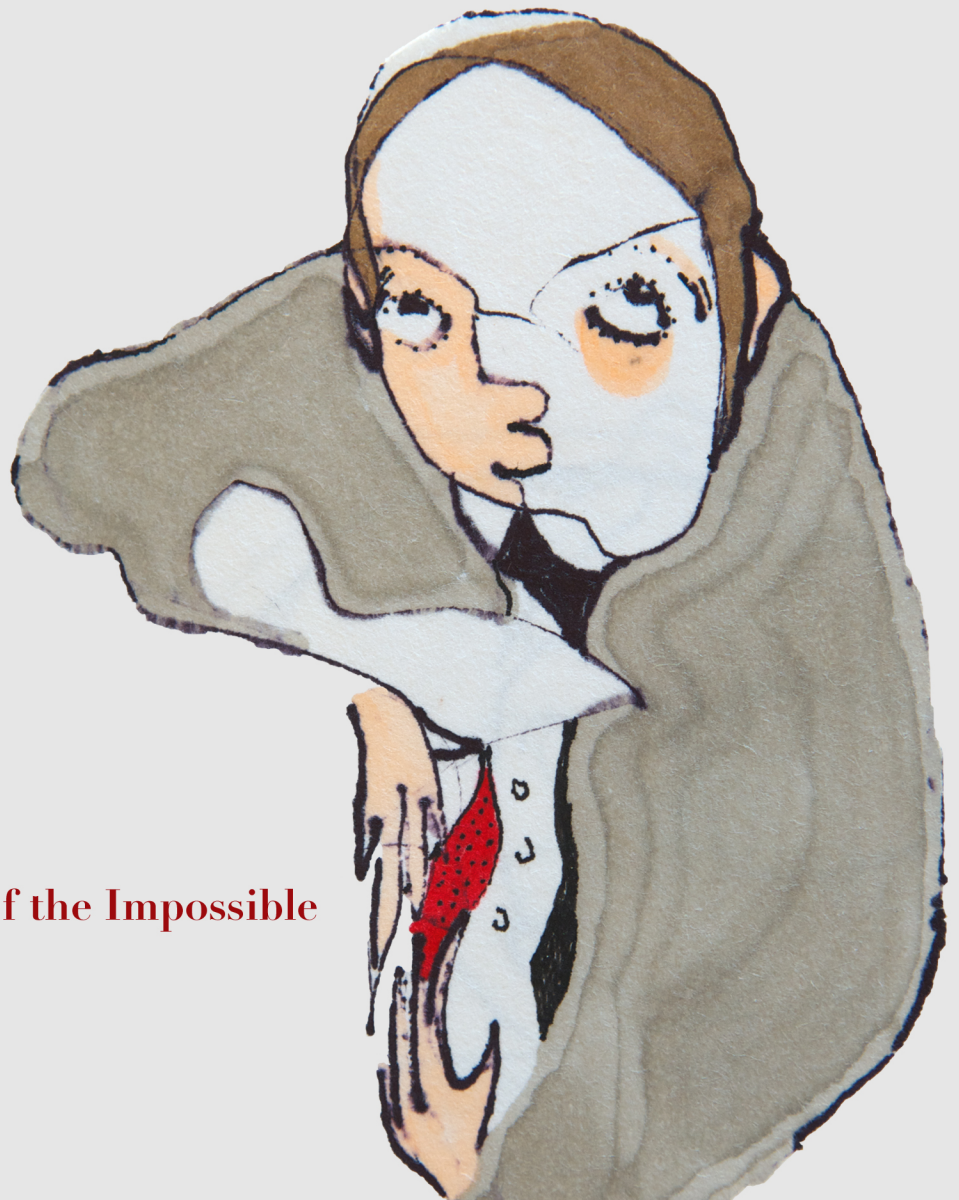


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Georges Bataille's Vertigo and the Flamenco of the Other

Tania Flores

Occidental College

Abstract: In his search for the origins of the transgressive philosophical project of Georges Bataille, biographer Michel Surya turns to Bataille's experiences in Spain in 1922. Surya cites two commentaries on flamenco written by Bataille twenty-four years apart. In the first of these commentaries, written in 1922, Bataille describes a female flamenco dancer in erotic terms. In the second commentary, written in 1946, Bataille describes the experience of flamenco in terms of ecstasy and death, essential components of the experience of approximating "the impossible" or the void. The 1922 depiction of the dancer is Bataille's first known erotic writing, significant because of the critical role of erotic terminology in describing the experience of the void. From the quotes Surya provides, flamenco emerges in Bataille's consciousness not only as an instance of approximating the impossible, but also as the catalyst for the development of this concept. Bataille, however, derives this catalytic eroticism from a process of Othering that subverts the experience of the impossible. By constructing this inherently unstable concept, Bataille denies the utility of flamenco in lending the possibility of political transgression and sovereignty to women.

Keywords: Georges Bataille, Michel Surya, flamenco, the impossible, bailaora, transgression



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Tania Flores

Occidental College

What is the meaning of art, architecture, music, painting or poetry if not the anticipation of a suspended, wonder-struck moment, a miraculous moment?

Georges Bataille, The Accursed Share, Volume III¹

As biographer Michel Surya points out, Georges Bataille's conceptualization of flamenco dance provides a window into the evolution of his thought and his move from extreme religious dogma to his later non-traditional erotic religiosity and his attempts to articulate "the impossible." Flamenco emerges in Bataille's consciousness not only as an instance of approximating the impossible, but as the catalyst for the development of this concept. Bataille, however, derives this catalytic eroticism from a process of Othering the women in flamenco, which ironically subverts the experience of the impossible. By constructing this inherently unstable concept, Bataille denies the utility of flamenco in lending the possibility of political transgression and sovereignty to women.

In 1946, Bataille wrote that flamenco dance "communicates an ecstasy, a sort of suffocated revelation of death and the feeling of touching the impossible."² In this comment Bataille applies his theoretical terminology to flamenco and conceptualizes the dance form as a potentially practiceable approximation of "touching the impossible," an experience represented in his work by the vertigo of the void and the abyss. Bataille's framework, however, functions as an artificial and limiting organizational system for flamenco.

An examination of Bataille's first descriptions of the dance form in 1922 problematizes his relationship with flamenco. In his early descriptions of the dance, Bataille eroticizes the flamenco dancer by exoticizing and Othering her, and the elements of his description hint at the forthcoming erotic terminology of the Bataillean vertigo that are the products of this process. The development of Bataille's intellectual project—from the problematic starting point of his shift to eroticism from extreme religiosity—however, undercuts the premises of his philosophical domain of inner experience. As the terminology of non-traditional erotic religiosity is the direct product of his Othering process, Bataille's conception of the experience of "touching the impossible" is fundamentally unstable.

¹ Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: Volumes II and III* (New York: Zone, 1976, 1991) 200.

² Quoted in Michel Surya, *Georges Bataille: An Intellectual Biography*, trans. Krzysztof Fijalkowski and Michael Richardson (London: Verso, 2002) 42.



Bataille's interpretation of flamenco as a means of experiencing the void implies congruence between flamenco and the theoretical approximation of "the impossible" that Bataille posits in *The Accursed Share: Volumes II and III*, that of attaining sovereignty through transgression. An application of the terms of this theoretical approximation to flamenco confirms the catalyzing role of eroticism: Bataille imagines eroticism as the transgressive trigger that enables the sovereign moment and consequently, the vertiginous experience of the abyss. Because Bataille, however, demands useless expenditure of eroticism and lack of utility of the sovereign moment, an interpretation of flamenco as a Bataillean approximation of "the impossible" demands the same. Understanding flamenco as essentially useless and meaningless obfuscates the utility of the transgression of flamenco in configuring a space in which the female dancer functions as politically sovereign. This space develops at and splits itself between the extremes of flamenco venues: the private *peña* and the public flamenco festival. As Timothy Malefyt points out, in the area between these two extremes—generally that of commercialized performance—consumers of flamenco "objectify" the art form and "the tourist industry capitalizes on images of the exotic."³ By furthering the objectification and exoticization of the woman in flamenco, Bataille failed to grasp the political vertigo of flamenco: the moment of social transgression that holds the potential for the sociopolitical sovereignty of the woman.

Flamenco Puro as an Artistic Context

Flamenco is in a perpetual state of flux, vacillating between tradition and evolution, purity and experimentation;⁴ one of the essential paradoxes of flamenco is that by virtue of its history and by definition, the art form requires all four of these elements. Because of this flexibility, an understanding of the subgenre of flamenco that Bataille experienced in 1922 is important. Surya's details of that encounter indicate that Bataille engaged with flamenco *puro*, or pure flamenco, the most traditional of flamenco subgenres.

In considering the dynamic, fluid character of flamenco, one must understand flamenco as fundamentally transcultural and multidimensional. Flamenco's influences include the Sephardic Jews, the Moorish occupiers of Andalucía, the Byzantine Church, Andalusian

³ Timothy Dewaal Malefyt, "'Inside' and 'Outside' Spanish Flamenco: Gender Constructions in Andalusian Concepts of Flamenco Tradition," *Anthropological Quarterly* 71 (1998): 65.

⁴ Experimentation in flamenco has taken the form of pop flamenco (see the work of Gipsy Kings, Pacifika, Niña Pastori, and Ricky Martin), the flamenco guitarist as a solo performer (see the work of Ramón Montoya and Paco de Lucía), flamenco-contemporary dance fusion (see the work of Joaquín Cortés), flamenco-ballet and flamenco-Latin dance fusion (see the work of Ballet Hispanico), and flamenco-Indian classical dance fusion (see the work of Flamenco Natyam).



folk traditions, and Latin American folk traditions.⁵ Flamencologists often attribute the synthesis of these influences to the *gitanos*, the Romani gypsies who arrived in Andalucía circa the fifteenth century and began to integrate the constitutive elements of flamenco in the late eighteenth century.⁶ Because the gitanos most likely originated in the Punjab region of India and migrated west toward Europe,⁷ flamencologists credit them with the similarities between flamenco and certain forms of Indian classical dance. Malefyt traces the origins of flamenco to the marginalized underclass of the “urban ghettos of the Andalusian cities of Seville, Jerez, and Cádiz...flamenco developed within the classed hierarchical society of that time. Poor indigent Gypsy and non-Gypsy artists performed flamenco under a variety of deplorable conditions.”⁸

While the Romani began to synthesize the disparate cultural influences in Andalucía, three dimensions of flamenco evolved: *cante*, or song, often considered the most important and original dimension;⁹ *baile*, or dance; and finally, *toque*, or guitar. Also central to flamenco puro is the component of *palmas*, the precisely timed hand claps that accompany a flamenco performance.

Flamenco puro adheres strictly to these three dimensions, often with a privileging of *cante*, and within *cante*, a privileging of *cante jondo* (deep song) over *cante chico* (small song). Flamenco puro emphasizes improvisation within traditional *palos* (styles) and *jaleo*, or discourse between the audience and performers. As a category, however, flamenco puro refers more to a subgenre of flamenco than to an experience of flamenco. Malefyt distinguishes between the “inside” and the “outside” experiences of flamenco; in his study, an intimate *cante jondo* contest in a *peña*, or private flamenco club, functions as the “inside” experience, while a commercial performance in a *tablao*, or venue for tourists, functions as the “outside” experience. As Malefyt finds, the fiercely protective nature and private “inside” of flamenco is characterized by the “deeply personal, almost intrusive” quality of the performance.¹⁰

⁵ Peter Manuel, “Andalusian, Gypsy, and Class Identity in the Contemporary Flamenco Context,” *Ethnomusicology* 33 (1989): 48; F. Herrera y Sánchez, “Cante Jondo: The Soul of Andalusia,” *Hispania* 36 (1953): 88; William Washabaugh, *Flamenco: Passion, Politics and Popular Culture* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1996) 35.

⁶ Manuel 50-51; Washabaugh 34-36.

⁷ Radu P. Iovita and Theodore G. Schurr, “Reconstructing the Origins and Migrations of Diasporic Populations: The Case of the European Gypsies,” *American Anthropologist* 106 (2004): 275.

⁸ Malefyt 65.

⁹ Malefyt 66-67.

¹⁰ Malefyt 68-69.

**Bataille's Encounter with Flamenco: The *Bailaora* and the *Concurso de cante jondo***

The performance of a flamenco *bailaora*, the female flamenco dancer, and a flamenco cante contest in Granada impacted Bataille during his residence in Spain in 1922. Over two decades later, Bataille recalled, “For several days, and every evening, I went to see a dancer every time she danced... The dance, essentially miming anguished pleasure, frustrates a challenge that catches the breath.”¹¹ Because the performance involved sufficient improvisation to entertain Bataille over a period of several days, his statement suggests that the *bailaora* likely performed flamenco puro. Similarly, the emotional range Bataille identifies in the flamenco performance that of “anguished pleasure” implies flamenco puro. Purists consider light-hearted, flirtatious palos such as *las sevillanas* more Andalusian folk dances than flamenco puro. Bataille’s description of the performance as one of “anguished pleasure” insinuates the performance of a palo such as *soleares por bulerías*, a core palo of the flamenco puro and jondo repertoires.¹² As Los Angeles-based flamenco dancer Katerina Tomás notes in an article about *soleares por bulerías*, this palo often serves as a solo piece for dancers, a performative tendency in keeping with Bataille’s singular *bailaora*. In addition, Tomás writes that *soleares por bulerías* combines the light-heartedness of the *bulerías* and the sorrow of the *soleares*,¹³ a tone that closely matches Bataille’s description of “anguished pleasure.”

The centrality of the dancer in Bataille’s statement implies an “outside” experience of flamenco. Malefyt notes that outside venues tend to de-emphasize cante while emphasizing baile as the central aspect of the performance.¹⁴ In addition, a *bailaora* is not likely to perform night after night in a private *peña*; that Bataille went to see this particular dancer “every time she danced” signifies a public, commercial exhibition.

Surya’s research on the cante contest Bataille attended, although cursory, provides sufficient information to infer another encounter with flamenco puro. The contest, more specifically a cante jondo tournament, took place in Granada. The term *cante jondo* developed in response to the rise of modernism and of flamenco palos influenced by Latin American and Andalusian folk music toward the end of the 1800s, which aficionados argued made use of cante chico.¹⁵ While the term *cante jondo* connotes pain and profound emotion, the term *cante chico*

¹¹ Quoted in Surya 42.

¹² For an impressive example of *soleares por bulerías*, also known as *soleá por bulerías*, see the performance of *cantaor* José Merce, *tocaor* Luis “Habichuela” and Miguel León, and *bailaora* La Chana at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gVKTGx-GDaE>.

¹³ Katerina Tomás, “Hybrid Flamenco Form *soleares por bulerías*,” (1994): 2.

¹⁴ Malefyt 66-67.

¹⁵ Washabaugh 12, 34-35.



connotes entertainment and commercialized forms of flamenco.¹⁶ The tournament Bataille attended was organized by Miguel de Falla, a well-known Spanish classical music composer who, according to J. B. Trend, “wished to...recover the genuine, older and uncorrupted Andalusian song: *cante andaluz*.”¹⁷ Therefore, the contest focused exclusively on *cante jondo*, a focus typical of flamenco puro.

According to Surya, a cantaor named Diego Bermúdez “El Tenazas” impressed Bataille, who later reminisced that Tenazas “sang rather, he threw out his voice in a sort of excessive, rending, prolonged cry which, when you thought it was exhausted, reached, in the prolongation of a death moan, the unimaginable.”¹⁸ In this observation, Bataille repeats his use of the language of the abyss in referring to death, “the unimaginable,” the excess of the *cante*, and the surpassing of the limit of the voice.

The Catalytic Eroticism of Flamenco

Bataille’s original description of his encounter with flamenco stands in stark contrast to the polished interpretation of flamenco as an approximation of “the impossible” he wrote over twenty years later. As Surya points out, Bataille’s intellectual domain in 1922 did not extend far beyond his extreme religiosity,¹⁹ and the theoretical framework he would apply to flamenco in 1946 was as yet undeveloped. Surya’s parenthetical note that Bataille’s description of the *baïa* is “doubtless the first written erotic suggestion we know from him”²⁰ takes on enormous import because, as David B. Allison writes, the “emotional intensities” produced by experiences of the void are characterized by erotic religiosity.²¹ Bataille reiterates this connection in his observation that “we may experience, in the related domains of eroticism and religious meditation, joys so great we are led to consider them exceptional, unique, surpassing the bounds of any joy imaginable.”²² By catalyzing eroticism in Bataille’s work, flamenco instigated the destruction of the limit of Bataille’s intellectual domain in 1922—religious dogma—and the construction of the experience of “touching the impossible” as one of erotic religiosity.

¹⁶ Manuel 52.

¹⁷ J. B. Trend, “Recollections of Falla,” *The Musical Times* 88 (1947): 15.

¹⁸ Quoted in Surya 43.

¹⁹ Surya 42.

²⁰ Surya 42.

²¹ David B. Allison, “Transgression and the Community of the Sacred,” *The Obsessions of Georges Bataille: Community and Communication*, ed. Andrew J. Mitchell and Jason Kemp Winfree (Albany: SUNY Press, 2009) 86.

²² Bataille 103.



The Bailaora as Other: Exoticization in Bataillean Eroticism

Because Bataille attempts to approximate the abyss through the process of eroticizing the bailaora, the source of this eroticism merits examination. In 1922, Bataille wrote:

I saw a native dancer who looked like a panther with a lithe little body, nervous and violent. A little animal of this breed seems to me one that could set a bed on fire in a more devastating way than any other creature.²³

In this description found by Surya in a letter written to a cousin Bataille marks the bailaora as animalistic, not only through the explicit labeling of her as an *animal*, but also by comparing her to a panther and invoking the terms *creature* and *breed*. Exoticization of the bailaora complements the animalism of the description; Bataille distinguishes her as different and exotic by branding her a *native* dancer, grounding this difference and exoticism in physicality, in the athleticism of *lithe* and the evocative sensuality of *body*. The focus on her physicality reaches its height in her sexualization and dovetails with a fetishization of violence that appears in the phrase “nervous and violent” and recurs in Bataille’s imagined ability of the dancer to “set a bed on fire.” This fetishization plays a particularly important role in the construction of the image of the exoticized bailaora because it will give way to violent transgression and the “image” of death as an approximation of the abyss in Bataille’s later writings on “the impossible.” As Debra A. Castillo notes, “violent death is the narrative crux the metaphorical fetish that serves as a convenient shorthand for the unleashing of primitive forces that can/will rewrite history, returning ‘civilized’ men and women to their primitive origins.”²⁴ Finally, a tone of condescension underscores the animalism, exoticization, sexualization, and fetishization of violence characterizing Bataille’s 1922 commentary on the bailaora; the word *little* appears twice, once in each sentence. Bataille not only saw the bailaora as different, but also as lesser.

In combination, these components of Bataille’s description effectively eroticize the bailaora by Othering her. Animalism eroticizes by appealing to primal instincts; physical exoticism and the fetishization of violence eroticize by evoking the body and explicit sexualization; and condescension insinuates a system of power relations within the erotic context established by the other components of the description. Meanwhile, Bataille constructs animalism and violence as parallel to “native” and “native” as opposed to himself, a non-native. He con-

²³ Quoted in Surya 42. Interestingly, this description echoes a strikingly similar description in V. S. Naipaul’s novel *Guerrillas*, which deals with the condition of a Caribbean island in the wake of colonialism. One of the novel’s protagonists, Jimmy, writes a narrative in which a white woman, speaking in the first person, fantasizes about him. The fictional woman, Clarissa, describes his clothes as marking “the lines of his lithe, pantherlike body” (Naipaul 59). The intriguing aspect of the similarities between this quote from *Guerrillas* and Bataille’s letter lies in the alterity of the objects in both descriptions.

²⁴ Debra A. Castillo, “Postmodern Indigenism: ‘Quetzalcoatl and All That,’” *Modern Fiction Studies* 41.1 (1995): 38.



structs her physicality and sexuality as exotic and thus as Other. Bataille's erotic terminology—the terminology he applies to the experience of the void—is predicated on these Othering processes. Ironically, this problematic and unsound premise undermines the framework Bataille would fit flamenco into so neatly twenty-four years later, the framework whose development was triggered by Bataille's experience of flamenco. Allison argues that because the erotic terms of this framework belong to the subjective domain of "inner experience" and are "relatively untrammelled by the rationality and objectivity...of philosophical discourse," they mark a transgressive quality of Bataille's work.²⁵ By engaging in the unoriginal precedent of Othering, however, Bataille effaces this transgressive quality, making his vertigo yet another instance of the misappropriation of cultural practices by writers and philosophers. Castillo points out that in such previous writings "the staged exoticism of half-imagined indigenous practices resonated strongly with Western anti-canonical cultural projects."²⁶ Bataille's treatment of the bailaora destabilizes the "anti-canonical" project of Bataille—in general terms, excess and the transgression of limits through debauchery.

Sovereignty by Means of Erotic Transgression: The Condition of Uselessness

In writing in 1946 that flamenco "communicates...the feeling of touching the impossible," Bataille presents flamenco as a potentially practiceable form of experiencing the void that he describes in *The Accursed Share: Volumes II and III*. In this work, Bataille locates vertigo, the experience of the void, in the sovereign moment and traces the sovereign moment to an act of transgression. Bataille forms an inextricable link between eroticism and transgression; he applies erotic terminology—the language set in motion by flamenco—not only to the experience of the abyss, but also to the means of approaching this experience.

Bataille's discussion of transgression centers on "the festival," a communal and largely conceptual event modeled after the chaos that follows the death of a king in certain islands of the Pacific. Bataille argues that the "transgressive" and "prohibited" activities entailed by the festival—destruction, killing, prostitution, and abandonment of work—become "divine" or "sacred" in affirming death and sexuality.²⁷ Bataille does not restrict eroticism to those activities that affirm sexuality, however. He identifies an erotic core in death, returning to the term *anguish* to link it to eroticism and to articulate the erotic nature of the experience of the void, the "distressing image of death."²⁸ Actual death depreciates in value; Bataille writes:

²⁵ Allison 86.

²⁶ Castillo 36.

²⁷ Bataille 91-92.

²⁸ Bataille 84.



And ultimately it is not ruination, let alone death, it is joy that the pursuit of ruination attains in the festival. We draw near to the void, but not in order to fall into it. We want to be intoxicated with vertigo, and the image of the fall suffices for this.²⁹

Debauchery and prohibited activities enable this “fictitious approach of death.”³⁰

Bataille’s admission that joy is in fact the objective of “the festival” equates death with “ruination,” a crucial aspect of the Bataillean festival. Bataille understands eroticism as necessarily characterized by useless expenditure; it is only transgressive because of its counterproductive nature and its tendency toward “ruination.”³¹ For Bataille, transgression necessitates eroticism, and eroticism necessitates useless expenditure.

The sole meaning of the act of erotic transgression lies in its effect of producing sovereignty; Bataille notes that “only eroticism is evil for evil’s sake, where the sinner takes pleasure for the reason that, in this trespass, he attains *sovereign* existence.”³² The experience of the vertigo of the abyss occurs in the sovereign moment resulting from the act of erotic transgression. Like the act itself, the sovereign moment necessarily entails uselessness. After describing the “world of the intellect where each thing must answer the question ‘What is the use of that?’”³³ Bataille posits a causal relationship between leaving this world and attaining sovereignty. Uselessness thus functions as a condition of sovereignty. In *The Accursed Share*, Bataille returns to the condition of uselessness and reinforces its relationship with sovereignty by stating definitively, “Life *beyond utility* is the domain of sovereignty.”³⁴

Thus, if the act of erotic transgression and the sovereign moment provide the framework for understanding flamenco as an approximation of the impossible, Bataille could have only understood flamenco as meaningless and useless. Bataille’s misappropriation of flamenco for his “transgressive” project not only Othered and demeaned the female flamenco dancer, but also denied the potential that flamenco poses for constructing a space in which the woman appears as transgressive and sovereign not in the Bataillean sense, but in the political sense.

²⁹ Bataille 109.

³⁰ Bataille 109.

³¹ Bataille 177.

³² Bataille 134.

³³ Bataille 112.

³⁴ Bataille 198.



The Utility of Political Transgression and Sovereignty: Configuring a Space for the Woman in the Flamenco *Feria* and the “Inside” of the Peña

Although within flamenco, of course, there is no death of a king to catalyze an event of Bataillean proportions, flamenco fittingly offers an analogous festival, the flamenco *feria*. As Washabaugh details, death and debauchery are central to the experience of the feria, combining to produce the experience of vertigo:

Bright and blaring and daring, the carnivalesque fair in Andalucía is a seasonal opportunity for release from the workaday constraints of social life, especially for women. For three or four days at a time, men and women gambol with abandon, singing, dancing, drinking, and parading about.... For women, the *feria* is a time for walking on the wild side, stepping out and away from the suffocating privacy of the household, parading to the fairground located on the very edge of town where the cultural world abuts on the wild countryside. At this liminal time and in this marginal space, women dress in the most daring clothes and dance the most provocative dances...³⁵

At first glance, Washabaugh's description of the feria appears to mirror the transgression and frenzy of the Bataillean festival—the clause “gambol with abandon, singing, dancing, drinking, and parading about” insinuates a lowering of inhibitions and, consequently, a breaking with acceptable behavior. Washabaugh's portrayal, however, intimates usefulness, particularly in his pointed remark about the involvement of women in the feria. The fact that women present a challenge to spatial constraints and issues of modesty imposed on them indicates transgression, but sociopolitical transgression rather than the Bataillean transgression characterized by useless expenditure. Furthermore, sociopolitical transgression does not seem to exclude eroticism: Washabaugh observes that “seasonal celebrations of the fair and the carnival provide occasions for women to flaunt their culturally defined wildness, their seductive physicality, and their passion.”³⁶ Perhaps eroticism, then, is not a necessarily useless expenditure.

Malefyt portrays the intimate flamenco peña as another space in which women can engage in sociopolitical sovereignty. Malefyt distinguishes between “inside” flamenco venues, or private peñas, and “outside” flamenco venues, or public tablaos. With the communal flamenco feria serving as the relative marker of the “outside” and the “public,” the tourist-geared tablao lies between the peña and the feria. Malefyt argues that “flamenco is increasingly objectified in the public realm, an arena of contentious display and power relations that coincides with the outside or male schema of the Andalusian gender equation.”³⁷ In this “public realm” in which

³⁵ Washabaugh 2-3.

³⁶ Washabaugh 109.

³⁷ Malefyt 65.



the cultural practice of *machismo* undeniably plays a part,³⁸ “the tourist industry capitalizes on images of the exotic, offering sensational depictions of dancers and singers that suggest their availability for public consumption.”³⁹ This phenomenon describes Bataille’s encounter with flamenco in 1922 perfectly; he observed the bailaora in a venue given to objectification, exoticization, and consumption. Regardless of whether the *peña* is a female space or a male space or of whether it is a gendered space at all, it is a space that protects flamenco performers – and in particular, the woman in flamenco – from people like Bataille, writers and philosophers in search of “exotic objects of knowledge or useful objects for trade,” in the words of Castillo.⁴⁰ In the space, the woman appears as sociopolitically sovereign, free to make a statement that cannot be misappropriated in the manner that the statement of the bailaora Bataille observed was.

Bataille not only overlooked the political vertigo of the woman in flamenco, but further obscured it by Othering the bailaora. Occupied with the task of constructing a theoretical framework on that act of Othering, Bataille neglected to see the irony of attempting to make a transgressive contribution to philosophical discourse founded on a remarkably conventional prejudicial fallacy. He also failed to notice the irony of missing a political instance of sovereignty and transgression by constructing a flawed architecture for sovereignty and transgression antithetical to their political manifestations. Meanwhile, the scaffold where he sat collapsed before the “image of the fall” could appear before him.

³⁸ Manuel 52.

³⁹ Malefyt 65.

⁴⁰ Castillo 35.



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